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The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs keeps saying it's working hard to clear a disgraceful backlog at its office that handles disability claims from across the Valley and Northern California. But the agency isn't doing enough to follow through on that pledge.

On Wednesday, the VA made a big deal of announcing that 16 of its 56 regional offices are deploying a new system to speed up claims. They will be divided into "express" claims (those with only one or two medical conditions and with all the records available), "core" cases (those with more than two medical conditions or needing additional documentation) and "special" claims (those that need individual attention because of serious wounds, sexual trauma, homelessness or other issues). It seems like a common-sense procedure that should have already been in place, but is welcome nonetheless.

The 16 offices also will get new technology and software upgrades in the next three months. They're in the first wave of a "transformation" plan designed to process an additional 150,000 to 200,000 claims a year. The goal is to complete claims within 125 days with 98 percent accuracy in 2015.

The VA's Oakland office falls far short of those standards. It has the worst backlog in the country, nearly 34,000 cases. The average wait is about 320 days. The VA inspector general reported in May that less than 40 percent of claims it audited were handled correctly.

So why isn't Oakland among the first to receive the upgrades?

The VA's answer is that the full retooling will happen in Oakland after intensive retraining of its employees. The Oakland office is supposed to get the improvements early next year, along with offices in Los Angeles and San Diego.

That isn't likely to satisfy agency critics. Rep. Jerry McNerney, D-Pleasanton, is among those who say the VA should do everything required to fix the Oakland office as soon as possible. "The VA must be held accountable for reducing the delays and inaccuracies at the Oakland facility," he said in a statement to The Bee's editorial board. "If that means bringing new technology and processes, then that is what the VA must do."

After he and other area members of Congress loudly complained this spring, VA officials promised a "performance improvement" plan in Oakland that includes the eight weeks of training for every staffer – a step never taken before.

The office, which has a branch in Sacramento, handles claims from 48 counties stretching from the Oregon border to Bakersfield, home to more than 837,000 veterans. That number is growing as new veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan join the ranks of those who served in previous wars.

The VA has a big job on its hands with that surge. It completed a record-breaking 1 million claims each of the past two years and is on pace to hit that mark this year.

"Even so," the agency itself says, "too many veterans have to wait too long to get the benefits they have earned and deserve."

Such words of concern are nice. For area vets, action would be better.